

Recollections of gay men: Retrospectively exploring how school-based supports lessen  
the effects of victimization for gay high school students

Thesis

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## Abstract

LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) adolescents experience pervasive victimization in the high school environment that has a negative effect on their psychosocial well-being. These adolescents are at an increased risk of depression, suicide, substance abuse, absenteeism from school, dropping out of school, and frequently face alienation from peers and teachers/administrators. Therefore, targeted interventions and a greater sense of inclusiveness in the high school environment are essential to reversing current trends. This study seeks to retrospectively explore high school experiences of victimization of gay men in their 30's and their recollection of school personnel response and support. The experiences of the participants are then compared to the current literature on the LGBTQ youth experience in schools to see if there have been advances in these areas and where there are gaps. The study was administered using in-person interviews, and each participant was interviewed according to an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide. Participants were recruited through both convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. Results indicated that participants experienced similar struggles to what the literature is describing about today's youth experience 12-20 years ago, such as verbal and physical victimization, feelings of low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, alienation, heterosexism/homophobia, and a lack of teacher/administrator response to peer victimization. A comparison of the

sample group of gay men to the literature reveals that not much has changed in the high school environment in the past 12-20 years. Three overarching themes emerged from the responses: the sources and nature of victimization, pervasive effects of victimization during the high school years and afterward, and perceptions of the current high school climate and recommendations for intervention in these environments today. The stories of these participants could also have been the stories of adolescents today. A comparison with the literature today reflects that adolescents still experience similar risk factors and a lack of social support. Implications for social work education and practice are discussed, with an emphasis on LGBTQ targeted interventions and a greater inclusiveness of these issues into university curricula.

## Dedication

Dedicated to Becky and David Horn

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge several individuals who were instrumental in completing my senior honors thesis project. First, I would like to thank Dr. Susan Saltzburg for her unfailing guidance and support in formulating and engaging in this research project. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Balaswamy, Dr. Warren, Dr. Fontanella, Dr. Mares and Dr. Anderson for their interest in my education and for instilling in me a fervor for research. Finally, I want to thank Kimberly Bonta for her unflagging support, her intense determination, and for lending an ear during my entire undergraduate career.

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## Chapter 1: Statement of Research Topic

### Introduction

LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) youth face a multitude of challenges in the high school environment. Peers, teachers, and administrators frequently engage in heterosexist and homophobic behavior that label LGBTQ adolescents as “outcasts” or “outsiders”. These adolescents are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers, are much more likely to miss long periods of school time because of victimization, and report very low levels of teacher and administrator support based on sexual orientation and gender expression (GLSEN, 2007).

Adolescence is also a critical time in an individual’s development. Adolescents develop a sense of identity by looking inside of themselves and looking to others for feedback and support, particularly peers. Peer groups help adolescents discover their values and beliefs about sexual relations, compassion, leadership, conflict, and mutual problem solving. Without accepting peers and adults in an adolescent’s life, they can miss out on developing interpersonal skills that are essential to functioning in the everyday adult world (Ashford, LeCroy & Lortie, 2006).

Given the ongoing reality of victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression in high schools across the country, several questions are of great importance. How have the nation’s schools become more or less accepting in the past 12-20 years?

How are the experiences of gay men in their adolescence 12-20 years ago similar or different to the experiences of youth today? Have the nation's schools become any more accepting of LGBTQ youth? And how do school teachers and administrators respond to victimization based on LGBTQ status? By recapturing the history of gay men in their adolescence and giving a voice to their trepidations and victories, we can better understand where advances have been made and learn what areas of need continue to challenge the school experience for these youth. With the rise of school social workers as critical personnel in schools, the social work profession can play an important role in creating a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ adolescents.

#### Purpose of Study and Research Question

This study seeks to retrospectively explore high school experiences of victimization of gay men in their 30's and their recollection of school personnel response and support. The experiences of the participants are then compared to the current literature on the LGBTQ youth experience in schools. This study will add to the LGBTQ knowledge base, and bring to light both the advances that have emerged in current school environments for supporting LGBTQ students, and the persistent challenges faced by these youth.

The specific research objectives include the following:

- To explore the issues facing LGBTQ youth in the school environment

- To add to the literature about the LGBTQ youth experience in schools, citing on-going challenges that have not diminished with time and more progressive social change faced by these youth
- To highlight the importance of school personnel and policy response in supporting marginalized youth

The overall research question was the following: How do the experiences of victimization and social support of gay male adolescents in the high school environment of one to decades ago compare to the literature on LGBTQ adolescents today? Several research questions are explored in the following study, including:

- 1) What challenges did gay adolescent youth in the past face in the high school environment? ;
- 2) What were their experiences of victimization and social support in this atmosphere? ;  
Who did they receive support from, and where were the gaps in social support? ;
- 3) How has the high school environment become more or less inclusive in the past 12-20 years? And has this atmosphere really become any more inclusive of LGBTQ youth?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Coming-out in a heterosexist high school environment can be a difficult task for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning) adolescents. Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter (2004) discuss the *Coming-out process hypothesis*, which describes the coming-out process as either a help or a hindrance to the development of LGBTQ adolescents. The authors found that a curvilinear relationship exists between the coming-out process and substance abuse, which may also apply to other risk factors as well (2004). According to a national survey completed by the Center for Disease Control in 2002, 2.3% of men identify as homosexual, 1.8% as bisexual, and 3.9% as another orientation, while 1.3% of women identify as homosexual, 2.8% as bisexual, and 3.8% as another orientation. (Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2002). Therefore, it is important to be sensitive to the needs of this population because they are a sizeable minority.

Additionally, the needs of the LGBTQ adolescent population differ from those of the heterosexual adolescent population. They experience societal stigma, particularly in the school setting. According to Ryan (2003), 1 in 3 LGBTQ adolescents report being harassed at school, 84.6% have heard homophobic remarks from peers, 50.5% have had their property damaged at school, 32.7% were threatened with a weapon at school, and 25.1% had skipped school because they felt unsafe. This stress is correlated with

heightened levels of isolation from family and peers, anxiety/low self-esteem, internalized homophobia, religious conflict, higher levels of substance abuse, suicidal ideation/attempts, and risky sexual behavior (Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle, 2000; Meyer, 2003). In a recent study by Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke (2009), youth voices reflected the importance of a positive and supportive school environment for emotional health and wellbeing. Similarly, Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) found lower levels of victimization and suicide in schools where there was perceived support from school personnel. It is evident that LGBTQ adolescents have a need for specialized social services that target their unique problems, particularly in the school setting.

Sexual identity formation is in itself an integral part of adolescent development. This identity is shaped by attitudes, values, beliefs about sexuality, stereotypes about gender/sex roles, religious values, degree of acculturation into society, and the importance of family/ethnicity in one's life (Ryan, 2003). Middle adolescence is marked by the increasing importance of peers, which contributes to identity, including sexual identity, as well (Anhalt & Morris, 1998). Without social support, especially of peers, the development of sexual identity is all the more difficult and a great source of stress.

The purpose of this study is to explore the nature of the relationship between school-based victimization based on sexual orientation and the social support from the school administration, focusing on the stories of gay men between the ages of 30 and 37.

After deriving themes from the resulting transcripts, a comparison will be made between the results and the related literature. When comparing the literature to the results, it is important to note “cohort effects”, which “refer to changes in society at a particular historical time that affect people” (Gambrill, 2006). Adolescents from 10-15 years ago (1994-1999) developed under different circumstances than today’s adolescents. From the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Lewinsky affair, adolescents in the 1990’s experienced events both in their personal lives and on the national stage that affected their views on the world. These adolescents also developed in an age where the world truly started to understand the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, and there was less open discussion about LGBTQ issues on the national agenda. The degree of difference between this cohort and the current cohort of adolescents may be partially attributable to this effect.

#### *Victimization and Risk Factors*

Munoz-Plaza, Quinn and Rounds (2002) explored the types of social support (emotional, appraisal, instrumental and informational) available to young adults in high school. The study also examined the connection between social support and sexual identity development. The authors conducted face-to-face interviews with 12 male and female participants, 18-21 years old, who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Participants found non-family members, which included peers and non-family adults, to be more supportive than family members. Participants perceived

heterosexual and LGBT-identified friends and non-family adults as providing emotional and instrumental support. However, participants perceived limitations to the emotional support they received from heterosexual peers to whom they disclosed their orientation. In addition to providing emotional support, peers and adults who also identified as LGBT provided valuable informational and appraisal, support. Most participants did not disclose to their parents during high school and perceived their parents and family members as offering limited emotional, appraisal and informational support. Sexual identity formation was also discussed, including aspects of denial and acceptance. The need for multiple resources emerged as a major theme, and participants described their longing for greater social support in their high school environment.

A substantial amount of research has been done on LGB victimization and its link to risk behaviors in adolescence. Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) conducted a quantitative study which analyzed secondary data from the 1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. 315 students in the sample self-identified themselves as LGB. The authors hypothesized that typical risk behaviors for the LGB population, such as smoking, marijuana use, cocaine use, and sexual behaviors, would be more frequent than heterosexual counterparts because of at-school victimization. Male and female students that reported high victimization, both heterosexual and LGB, had a greater frequency of each risk behavior than those who reported low victimization, although the significant



finding was that the added pressure of being LGB in the school environment led to an even greater frequency of risk behaviors than those of the heterosexual adolescents. Limitations included a lack of an experimental setting (thus affecting perceived causality), and the data was not longitudinal.

Williams, Connolly, Pepler and Craig (2004) hypothesized that LGB adolescents would have higher rates of victimization in the high school setting, and that there would be a link between high rates of victimization and psychosocial difficulties, with a mediating effect of less social support than heterosexual adolescents. 1,598 participants took part in this study, 97 of which indicated themselves as LGBQ, or about 6% of the adolescents in the study. The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was administered, as well as measures of victimization (bullying, sexual harassment, and physical abuse by peers) using Likert-type scales in a questionnaire. The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment and Peer Relationships questionnaire were given as well. LGBQ individuals reported greater rates of psychosocial distress and victimization than their heterosexual peers, and in a multivariate analysis they found that strong social support negates the effects of depression. A major limitation of the study was the relatively small size of the sample, as well as the location of the study (a large city in Canada).

Espelage and Swearer (2008) conducted a literature review that addressed the empirical definition of youth who are questioning their sexuality, and the effects of

bullying/homophobic epithets on LGBT adolescents. Common themes in the review included the important finding that sexually questioning youth, which include many in the high school adolescent population, experience greater psychological distress than heterosexual/exclusively homosexual youth. Additionally, greater psychological distress experienced by LGBT adolescents leads to greater frequency of substance abuse than comparable heterosexual adolescents across the literature.

### *Social Support*

Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) hypothesized that a specific group for LGB adolescents, such as a GSA (gay-straight alliance) would be correlated with lower victimization in schools, and thus lower frequencies of risk factors. Also, school administrator support should be correlated with similar outcomes. The Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior survey, which measures school victimization, suicidality, safety at school, and the size/ethnic makeup of the school, was given to students in 56 different high schools. Of these, 202 identified as LGBQ. Findings indicated that the larger the school size and more homogeneous the population, the more likely LGBQ students would feel unsafe. Programs associated with lower rates of victimization/suicidality included peer-support programs, nonacademic counseling, specific school anti-bullying policies, a student judiciary, staff training on sexual harassment, and peer-tutoring

systems. Limitations of this study included a potential lack of generalizability because of its location (solely Massachusetts), and a lack of experimental manipulation.

Russell, Seif and Truong, N.L. (2001) analyzed the Add Health data set to analyze the four relational domains of family, teachers, other adults, and peers and their relationship to school troubles, school attitudes, and academic performance of sexual minority youth. Sexual orientation and school outcomes (including GPA, questions about “getting homework done”, “getting along with schoolmates/teachers”, dislike of those around them, and social acceptance). 7.4% of the male data set and 5.3% of the female data set reported same-sex attraction. Gay males reported more time spent with mothers and similar academic outcomes to heterosexual peers, while bisexual males reported much more victimization/lower academic outcomes. While same-sex attracted females reported more negative social/academic outcomes, bisexual females reported even more negative outcomes. This study was limited because Add Health data does not focus specifically on the LGBQ population.

The GLSEN 2007 National School Climate Survey conducted a mixed-method study to assess the state of the LGBT population in the nation’s schools. A convenience sample was taken from a list of LGBT community organizations and those who self-selected to participate on MySpace. There were 6,209 participants, most of whom were in 10-11<sup>th</sup> grade. 86.2% reported being verbally harassed based on sexual orientation, 73.6%

heard homophobic remarks at school from peers and administrators, 44.1% had been physically harassed, and 60.8% of these did not reveal these problems to school staff because they felt it was “pointless” to do so. The multiracial LGBT population reported the highest level of harassment. 32.7% missed school because of feeling unsafe, and high verbal/physical harassment was correlated with varying degrees of absenteeism. Solutions put forward by GLSEN included GSA implementation, supportive educators and an inclusive curriculum, and comprehensive safe school laws and policies. Limitations included not being able to reach LGBT students who were not partaking in community support, although the MySpace area of the study tried to make up for this.

Shawn King (2008) explored in a qualitative study the perceived role of counselor support from the LGBT adolescent perspective. 10 LGBT college students ages 18-21 participated. Variables were identified from themes during the interviews, which included homophobia/heterosexism, LGBQ presence in curriculum, barriers to seeking support from a counselor, facilitating support, coming-out, and the importance of internet chat rooms. Students perceived administrators/counselors as having a lack of knowledge about the LGBQ population, and cited this as a barrier to support. Restraining forces in the school environment included homophobic comments, association of counselor with other silent school administrators, a lack of LGBQ subjects in curriculum, and a fear that the counselor would break confidentiality. Supporting forces included inclusion in the school

environment, inclusion in curriculum, a non-judgmental attitude, and an emphasis on confidentiality and LGBQ posters/stickers. Limitations included the retrospective nature of the study, the small size of the sample, the homogeneous sample (university setting), and a lack of ethnic diversity.

Espelage, Aragon, Birkett and Koenig (2008) hypothesized that sexual minority youth were more likely to report high levels of depression/substance abuse. 13, 291 youth from 18 different high schools in a Midwestern county were given the Dane County Youth Survey, which included questions about LGBQ status. Variables measured included self-reported victimization, substance abuse, sexual behavior, and the quality of relationships with family, peers, and schools. The results indicated that sexually questioning youth experienced more victimization than their LGB peers, and that alcohol/marijuana use and suicidal/depressed feelings were greater in LGB students than heterosexual students. A mediating factor in this study was parental support. If parental support was high, then the experiences of LGBQ youth did not differ substantially from comparable heterosexual youth.

Hansen (2007) conducted a literature review of current interventions for LGBT youth focused at three levels of analysis; Level I (Theoretical Basis), Level II (Empirical Research), and Level III (Program Evaluation). Several themes emerged from the review. Firstly, suicidal attempts and ideation are easier to report for the LGBT community than

actual suicides because of the societal stigma associated with both LGBT status and suicide. LGBT teenage suicide rates may be up to three times higher than heterosexual suicide rates. When evaluating LGBT youth, it is also important to note that many adolescents, even heterosexual individuals, do not always make it through every stage of development, and certainly not at the same rate. Intervention strategies included many of those mentioned by King, including forming GSA's and providing a more inclusive curriculum. In particular, GSAs have been correlated in the literature with improved relationships with peers and adults. A major limitation of this review is that LGBTQ intervention literature is still early in its history.

Murdock and Bolch (2005) conducted a study with 101 participants, recruited through convenience sampling from local LGBT community centers, and through snowball sampling, to explore the relationship between school victimization and psychosocial outcomes. School environment, personal victimization, teacher/external social support, school discipline problems, school belonging, and school achievement were among the variables measured. Variables were measured on a likert scale to interpret the varying degrees of each variable in the student's life, and the student's GPA was taken into account to measure school achievement. Higher levels of school exclusion were correlated with lower teacher support and decreased feelings of belonging. Additionally, LGB status accounted for about 10% of the variation in GPA. In this study,

parental support did not alleviate the stress that resulted from the school environment, stressing even more the importance of intervention in schools. Limitations included the reliance of self-reported experiences of LGB youth, as well as the non-representative sample and its reliance on self-report.

Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, and Smith (2001) conducted a quantitative study of 80 males and 76 females ( $n = 156$ ) who were chosen based on lesbian, gay, bisexual, or “free-spirit” status to discover the association between the coming-out process and its health-related associations. A 28-item scale was administered, which measured the level of involvement in LGBT activities. A likert scale was administered that measured internal homophobia, and five-point response scales were used to determine the participant’s level of self-esteem and recent anxiety/depression. Sexual episodes in the last three months were also measured. The model used in this study focused on the coming-out process and its effects on self-esteem, distress, and sexual activity (especially unprotected sex). Females were more likely to view homosexuality as positive, and those who were white and of higher socioeconomic status were more likely to be involved in gay/lesbian activity and to comfortably identify as part of the LGBT community. Positive views of homosexuality were correlated with higher self-esteem/lower anxiety, and being comfortable with identifying as gay was correlated with greater unprotected oral sex rates. High disclosure/involvement in the LGBT community

was correlated with unprotected anal sex, even controlling for substantial knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Limitations included a lack of generalizability because of the nonrandom sample, and youths were sampled primarily from an urban area.

This study will add to the LGBTQ knowledge base, and bring to light both the advances that have emerged in current school environments for supporting LGBTQ students, and the persistent challenges facing these youth in schools. An understanding of the gay male adolescent experience gleaned from participants in this study, in combination with the current literature, will help to identify gaps in services and social response and may serve to advocate for more inclusive school environments for gay youth.



## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study is a qualitative study using in-person, narrative interviews and inductive, thematic data analysis methodology (Padgett, 2008). The study aims to retrospectively explore high school experiences of victimization based on sexual orientation of gay men now in their 30's and their recollection of key school-personnel response and support. The experiences of the participants are then compared to the current literature on LGBTQ youth experiences in schools in order to discern advances in this area and identify persistent problems that continue to be faced by LGBTQ youth. Qualitative methods best fit the exploratory aims of the study by facilitating the inductive emergence of themes for describing the phenomenon (Padgett, 2008) of victimization and response. The study was administered using 45-60 minute in-person interviews. Each participant was interviewed according to an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide. The study was submitted and approved through the university's Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board. The materials submitted for the institutional review board submission included the Initial Application, Study Protocol, Flyer, and Consent Form.

### 3.2 Sample

The participants for the study were recruited through both convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods. Convenience sampling is a non-probability based

sample that is recruited through members of the population who are convenient.

Snowball sampling is when existing participants recruit additional participants through their acquaintances (Rubin & Babbie, 2009). These sampling methods are commonly used for the LGBTQ population because of the lack of an easily identifiable population from which to recruit (Meezan & Martin, 2003). Fliers indicating the purpose of the study and researchers' and university contact information were posted in LGBTQ venues across a large Midwestern city, including a large university campus, community centers and businesses. In addition, the researcher posted announcements of the study and an electronic attachment of the flyer on two university-wide list-serves (an LGBTQ Alumni listserv and a university faculty/staff list-serve). Criteria for participating in the study included the following:

- Participants' ages must fall between 30 and 39 years old
- Participants must have identified as gay or had an awareness of a gay identity during high school
- Participants will agree to a 45-60 minute in-person interview without compensation.

This age group was decided upon because of the researcher's interest in identifying those prevailing problems in schools that persistently continue to challenge the safety and emotional well-being of sexual minority youth. A primary goal of the study is to

explore shifts in societal attitudes that shape school response to LGBTQ adolescents by comparing the high school experiences of students who are now adults one to two decades post high school, with the literature pertaining to the challenges facing LGBTQ youth who are currently in high school.

The student researcher and thesis advisor collaboratively arrived at the number of participants in the sample (originally six but narrowed down to five) based on several factors: 1) this was the Bachelor level student's first introduction to qualitative methods; 2) the extensive amount of time required for narrative interviewing and open coding data analysis; 3) academic time constraints placed on the completion of the thesis; and 4) the challenge of recruiting participants. Challenges faced during recruitment included a lack of response to fliers and the lack of follow up on the part of several potential participants (see Discussion pages 61-62 for thoughts on why). Because this is an exploratory study aimed at better understanding the gaps in school personnel response to the needs of LGBTQ youth, the purpose was not to generalize the results; as such, the sample contributed to this understanding.

### 3.3 Data Collection

#### *Semi-Structured Interview Guide*

The interview was administered with a semi-standardized interview guide with several open-ended questions (see appendix A), which were accompanied by additional

probing questions when the student researcher felt elaboration was needed on a particular subject. The guiding questions (interview guide) for the study were developed from research on the related literature. Questions were formed by first referencing Kvale (1996), who explains the process of formulating interview questions by beginning with general research questions and then narrowing these down to specific questions to be used in the interview guide. These questions should take into account issues of cultural diversity, potential responses, and clarifying what specifically is being asked, and whether the questions relate to the overarching research question. Using a review of the literature as a source for question-formulation, the researcher first developed a list of topic ideas, and then reduced these ideas into open-ended questions to guide the interview. Demographics were also collected on participants, including age, current gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, highest level of education, and occupation, through a demographics form (see Appendix B).

### *Detailed Study Procedures*

The data gathered in this study was collected through in-person interviews. Recruitment fliers were posted in LGBTQ venues on the university campus and in the city (such as LGBTQ community centers like Stonewall Columbus and LGBTQ frequented restaurants and businesses with the permission of the directors and business owners). The flyers (see Appendix A) described the nature of the study, the institution sponsoring the

study, the contact information of the student researcher, and where the study was located. The flyer provided the name and phone number of the faculty member serving as Primary Investigator for any additional questions. The researcher also recruited participants through the Ohio State LGBT Alumni Society Listserv and an additional faculty listserv, and through asking existing participants if they knew of others who would be interested. Participants were invited to contact the student researcher and schedule the interview. The volunteers had the option of providing first name and contact information or not. Researchers then determined whether the candidate fit the criteria.

The interviews were 45-60 minutes in length and were audio-tape recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place in confidential community settings or in a reserved, private, small conference room in Stillman Hall at the College of Social Work on the main OSU campus. The researcher again explained the aims of the study and what the interviewing process would entail, and read aloud the consent form or gave the participant the consent form to read. Then the researcher asked if there were any questions and obtained written consent, asked about demographic information, and began asking the open-ended questions of the interview guide. The research asked probing questions corresponding to the responses given to the main interview questions and recognizing the individual journey of each participant. The interview concluded with the interviewer asking participants if they wished to be linked to additional community

resources based on the memories that were evoked by the interview questions. Each participant was given a list of community resources.

### *Protecting Patient Confidentiality*

The interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio-tapes by the student researcher. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to place on every file, and names were then removed. Random unassociated names were chosen for each participant. All interview notes had the date, time, place, and a pseudonyms listed to aid in organization. Names were kept under lock and key in a file cabinet in the primary investigator's office. Original tape recordings were kept in a locked file cabinet in the student researcher's office while the tapes were being transcribed. Once the tape had been transcribed, it was then placed in a locked file cabinet in the Personal Investigator's OSU office. At the conclusion of the study all tapes were destroyed. No presentations of the study included identifiable information.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The researcher started with the raw data from the audiotapes and notes. Transcription was verbatim and the lines were numbered. There were two margins placed in the transcriptions, one for coding and one for memoing (thoughts and reflections about what was being analyzed). Separate notes were also written in an interview journal, and these notes were used to aid in data analysis. After the interview transcripts were coded,

the primary investigator and researcher compared their individual versions of coding and came to a consensus about the data analysis (commonly called intercoder reliability).

Meaning units and concepts/themes were drawn from the data at first using open coding without *a priori* themes. Open coding was used to understand the total picture of what the participant was saying. Responses to each question were coded and then listed in a separate document under each semi-structured interview guide question using color codes to signify which interview each quote came from. In addition, data was analyzed using a constant comparative analysis, wherein the researcher compared coding from each analyzed text to those previously analyzed to be sure to capture all relevant coding themes until reaching analysis saturation (Padgett, 2008). After analyzing each interview, the interviewer reviewed the responses to determine if there were any areas of discussion that emerged reflecting critical importance to the study that had not been addressed in previous interviews. Wanting to be sure to saturate all relevant topics pertinent to the research question, the researcher used the grounded theory principle of “study saturation” by adding questions to the study guide that would capture the new and emergent revelations (Padgett, 2008).

Codes were then analyzed for similarities and differences, and then organized into emerging themes. A few of the themes were created using “en vivo” coding (using prominent direct quotes as codes in and of themselves) to truly capture the wording and

experiences of the sample group (Padgett). When moving from codes to themes, the researcher started with emic themes to respect the respondent's point of view. Emic themes “seek to capture the ‘lived experience’ from those who live it and create meaning from it” (Padgett, 1998). Next, the researcher used an etic perspective to ultimately reflect on the meaning of these themes and to interpret the study. Etic themes help the researcher to become a portrayer of “meaning in context”. Moving from etic to emic themes prevents coding and themes from straying too far from their original meaning. This process continued until all data was analyzed and all themes had been explored (Padgett, 1998). The result was several themes unified by three overarching themes that emerged organically during data analysis.

### 3.5 Trustworthiness

This is a qualitative study intended to probe participants’ specific perspectives, and thus was not intended to be generalizable to all gay men or all high school experiences of gay students. Qualitative inquiry looks to establish the trustworthiness of the findings in that they accurately capture ~~what~~ the voice of the participants (Padgett, 2008). The researcher used multiple strategies for ensuring rigor in the study (Padgett), including: 1) following a rigorous analysis process using constant comparative analysis in open-coding, returning to each analyzed text while analyzing a new text to compare findings; 2) providing a paper trail of all steps of the analysis process, including a color-



coded key for open-coding, memos in the margins of the texts to reflect coding thoughts;

3) peer review analysis of data (the advisor for the thesis analyzed the data separately, and then came together with the researcher for discussion and consensus); and 4) triangulation with the literature, examining the principal themes discussed in the literature with the findings.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Data was gathered from the participants through a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) and in-person narrative interviews. This chapter will reflect the demographic information and present the findings. The demographic categories included inquiries into the participants' age, current gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity/race, highest level of education, and occupation. The following are the demographic information for each participant:

- Male, 38 years old, gay, Latino, Masters, social worker
- Male, 36 years old, gay, Caucasian, some graduate work, teacher
- Male, 31 years old, gay, Caucasian, 4-year degree, buyer
- Male, 37 years old, gay, Caucasian, some college, information technology
- Male, 32 years old, gay, Caucasian, 4-year degree, information technology

Narrative responses from the participants focused on several different aspects of victimization and social support in the high school environment, including the sources and nature of victimization, pervasive effects of victimization during the high school years and afterward, and perceptions of the current high school climate and recommendations for intervention in these environments today. These three aspects

emerged during data analysis, and served as an overarching framework during the data reduction process. The following is a table outlining the themes that were generated:

Sources and Nature of Victimization	Pervasive Effects of Victimization	Perceptions / Recommendations High School Environment
<p><i>Victimized by “Macho Boys”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perpetrators were “jocks”</li> <li>• Name calling</li> </ul> <p><i>Non-Conventional Gender Expression</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mannerisms perceived as “gay” by others</li> <li>• Masculinity protects against victimization</li> </ul> <p><i>Teachers and Administrators “turned a blind eye”</i></p>	<p><i>The Fear of Being “found out”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invisibility in the 1980’s</li> <li>• “Passing”</li> <li>• Silence and invisibility</li> </ul> <p><i>Need for “Safe Places”</i></p> <p><i>Found Sanctuary in Non-Conforming Peers</i></p> <p><i>Self-Minimization: “I got off really easy”</i></p> <p><i>Teachers minimized victimization</i></p> <p><i>Internalized Homophobia: “This is not how I should be”</i></p>	<p><i>More safe space signage</i></p> <p><i>Just talking about “anything” is helpful</i></p> <p><i>Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)</i></p> <p><i>Role models</i></p> <p><i>Acceptance happens in a diverse environment</i></p> <p><i>“...they exist, and they are known to exist”</i></p> <p><i>Importance of Coming-Out for Self Acceptance</i></p>

Table 4.1: Overarching Themes and Subthemes

A noteworthy development took place as data was collected in the field. Participants, when prompted with semi-structured interview guide questions, oftentimes did not directly address the question, and instead focused on capturing a vivid and

accurate picture of their high school experiences. Responses often were tangential, but were still very relevant to the subject matter. This may be partially attributed to the stigmatized nature of gay adolescent experiences, and the silence that the men in this study have faced for a decade or more. By allowing each participant to elaborate on specific memories as they came to mind, the true picture of each man's adolescent experience could be captured and honored. Below are the findings from the thematic, content analysis. Pseudonyms are used to designate the various participant voices.

#### Sources and Nature of Victimization

##### *Victimized by "Macho Boys"*

Every participant in the study described being victimized by those of "popular" or "macho" status, or by those that were "athletic" or "jocks". The perpetrators of the victimization were viewed as part of a separate sphere or social status from these participants, and seemed often to be accorded a higher social status than these men as well. Their high school environments mirrored the greater patriarchal society, where men with traditionally masculine behaviors and characteristics are given greater power and deference.

##### *Perpetrators were "macho", "jocks"*

“...it was usually the jocks, it was people that were more “masculine”, so to speak, but I look back at it now and I’m like, ‘Were they really that much more masculine, or were they just so insecure in their own sexuality?’” (Louis).

Participants’ accounts of the victimization that they experienced often included the mention of particularly “masculine” perpetrators. Words used to characterize these boys included “macho”, “athletic”, “sporty”, and “masculine”. Much of their high school memories revolved around peers that embodied these characteristics, and the negative relationships that existed between them.

Reactions to the “masculine” boys were varied. Some of the participants normalized the experience, and had the following rationale:

“I think there’s just an overwhelming thing where everyone thinks that you’re in high school, and that’s just what happens when you’re in high school” (Louis). Several participants voiced the same opinion, and thus minimized the trauma that they experienced at the hands of those who were more “masculine” than themselves.

#### *Name calling*

“One was a kid that I had gone to school with probably since I was in elementary school. And, he would always come over to me and ask me, he would never say gay, he would say bisexual, he would say, ‘Are you still bisexual?’ I’m like, ‘What? What are you talking about?’ So he would harass me. But a lot of times,

it was mostly walking through the hallway, and people saying, ‘Fag. You’re gay.’ Something along the lines of that” (Fred).

Stories such as the one above are indicative of the experiences of every participant interviewed. Participants were called many different names, including “gay”, “bi”, and “faggot”, which are all particularly loaded words. Each participant had a different view of name calling, ranging from seeing the words as just simple semantics to perceiving the words as an attack on their identity and character.

Name calling also established a certain hierarchy in the high school atmosphere:

“...[name calling] was mostly from that group of football players that always had the upper edge in high school, they were the popular ones” (Mark).

Perpetrators used name calling to establish a hierarchy in the high school atmosphere. By calling participants “faggots”, “gay”, and any other number of names, perpetrators ensured that these men would be stripped of power and position in the high school environment. Perpetrators also made sure that others would also classify these men as gay. It is important to note that all five participants reported primarily verbal victimization, with few reports of physical victimization.

#### *Non-Conventional Gender Expression*

Each participant also experienced victimization based on their gender expression. Gender expression that was non-conventional was perceived as different and was viewed

negatively by peers in the high school environment, while stereotypical “masculinity” was considered a privileged status) and was viewed positively by others.

*Mannerisms perceived as “gay” by others*

“Once I figured out I was gay, like I said, the verbal taunts and stuff, it was rare, but the fact that I knew I was gay, and I would get a verbal taunt like that, and trying to prove that you’re not, but you really are...” (Blake).

Each participant described the separate spheres of their inner experiences and the perception of their outer appearances to others, and the discrepancy between the two. It was difficult for these men to reconcile their developing gay identity on the inside, and their outer image of a “straight” adolescent. They struggled to put forth “masculine” mannerisms in order to protect themselves from the victimization that they would experience if they did not.

One gay man discussed his struggles with being perceived as gay by others, and his vehement denial of being attached to a label:

“Once I said, ‘There’s something that I’ll never be able to tell anybody.’ And I thought I was being really covert about it, and he’s like, ‘What, that you’re gay?’ And I was like, ‘No! No no no!’” (Gerald).

Despite careful attention to gender expression, his peers were able to see through these “passing” efforts, and questioned his sexual orientation. Other participants described

being “emotional” and “sensitive” as characteristics that were not generally associated with the masculinity of men at the time, and as reasons in and of themselves to be victimized by others.

*Masculinity protects against victimization*

“I think it probably helped. If I were a little more effeminate, I think I would have had a much rougher time. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that my masculinity, masculinity factor, whatever you want to call that continuum, and nobody is this or that... and leaning towards what was socially acceptable by a larger population helped tremendously” (Mark).

Out of the five participants, the two that identified as “masculine” reported experiencing less victimization because of what was perceived as “socially acceptable” behavior. Participating in activities similar to what the “macho” or “athletic” boys did was perceived by every participant as a factor that aided in protecting them. One participant described trying out for the baseball team, but not following through, and thus failing at publically portraying a traditionally masculine image. Masculinity and femininity were viewed as polarized points along a continuum of gender expression for several of the participants, all of whom located themselves somewhere between “the middle point” and the extreme end with the “masculine domain”. Being positioned in this



middle zone served to caution against mannerisms that might be construed as feminine and became an adaptive mechanism for protecting against victimization.

*Teachers and Administrators “turned a blind eye”*

So how did teachers and administrators respond to the victimization and the personal reactions experienced by each gay student in the study? Teachers and administrators overwhelmingly had no response or a very weak/minimal response to the victimization occurring in the high school environment. In the passage above, Gerald describes having a “whole community” of support, but this community apparently did not involve teachers or administrators, a vital component to any adolescent’s support system. Gerald also mentions “dissociation” from the high school environment, which is another form of self-alienation that may have been due to his lack of support.

“I felt very lost and I felt like I was just going through this. I had friends, I had a whole community of people, I was involved but, there were no teachers that stand out. In elementary, in middle school there are, but in high school I dissociated for four years” (Gerald).

Fred also described a lack of any “visually apparent” intervention. Teachers and administrators were, at the very least, not overt in their support. Two men also discussed the lack of consequences for perpetration. Normal interventions such as detention and

verbal reprimands were not used. Interventions were also not specifically targeted towards LGBTQ youth.

Two different men did report receiving support from a select few teachers in an otherwise unsupportive environment:

“He made me more comfortable with who I am, able to speak my mind... there was one other person who was a camp counselor, and he was gay also, and that helped tremendously” (Mark).

The presence of those school personnel who were gay or who at least provided a general level of support were seen as allies in these adolescents’ lives. Supportive teachers had far-reaching positive influence for these men, and have had a profound effect on who they are today.

### Pervasive Effects of Victimization

#### *The Fear of Being “Found Out”*

Maybe even more pervasive than the victimization itself was the “fear of being victimized”. Every participant demonstrated constant vigilance in case of unexpected bullying, which for many caused undue stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as a general uneasiness within the high school environment.

#### *Invisibility in the 1980s*

The politics and social climate during the historical time period that these participants attended high school bred uneasiness for several of the participants. Even when the gay rights movement was dominating much of the national stage, students still felt that gay was a dirty word:

“...that long ago, it wasn’t even acknowledged, and I was in high school from what, ’85 to ’89. And no one even talked about being gay, or if they did it was scandalous...” (Gerald).

As Gerald mentions above, being gay was viewed as “scandalous”, as was even mentioning the word or the concept. Only one of the participants came out in their high school environment, while the rest remained closeted throughout their high school careers. This may have partly been due to the time period and the general level of acceptance of the LGBTQ population, particularly on the micro level.

### *“Passing”*

“Passing” in the high school environment, for these men, signified a public way to present themselves as “normal” or “masculine” guys. Given the developmental period of adolescence, the need to conform and fit in was a strong influence. One participant described the overwhelming pressure to conform within his community:

“It was like everybody did the same thing, everybody lived in, their houses looked the same, there was a path that you followed, and if you didn’t fit then you were just pushed out” (Gerald).

There was this heightened awareness that any reflection of feminine mannerisms would call attention to the differences that lie between them and the macho boys, setting them up for taunting or exclusion. Being “pushed out”, or being marginalized because of differences, was cited as the ultimate fear of most participants, although the implications of this were left unsaid in every interview. This may reflect the fear of the unknown that the participants had, and the negative message they received about their sexual identity. Social pressures were enormous for each participant: to date girls, to use masculine mannerisms, to be religious, and to be of the same race as everyone else.

To succeed at “passing as straight” even meant at times, rejecting support from teachers or administrators if it was offered:

“I think even if the administration or the teachers or anyone there had tried to have some kind of program, or try to pull you off to the side, and say, I think everybody would have denied it” (Blake).

Even if these students had wanted to accept the help of supportive school staff, they would not have been able to because they might have been found out by others. Another participant described ambivalence, a longing for the support and liking it, but never being

able to accept it. Several participants explained that they tried to “pass” as a direct result of the victimization they experienced for not doing so. Coming-out as gay meant relinquishing constant vigilance and any sense of control over the environment.

*Silence and invisibility*

Participants described feeling “silent” and “invisible” in the high school environment. One participant discussed how he protected himself and remained invisible and marginalized:

“But, I think that you sort of take on the persona of those around you, that you’d rather be part of this bigger group than ostracized in this smaller group...”

(Louis).

Each participant cited situations where they felt invisible and silenced, either because of self-imposed isolation, or because of being outcast by peers. Participants described “hiding”, “camouflage”, “dread”, a lack of “visibility”, “alienation”, and “covering tracks”. Much of this was done in defense, and some was imposed upon them:

“...it would have been great to have more visibility and more acknowledgement and more people being out, but it just wasn’t, it was still extremely racist where I lived, so I can’t imagine what could have been done to make me feel more included as a queer person” (Gerald).

Gerald recounted not being able to even envision what it would be like to be more visible as a gay man, or to be included in the community as a “queer person”. He was silenced and unable to give voice an important aspect of his identity. Instead, he was forced to “hide” behind those who were more confident in their identities. Gerald also dealt with the dual stigma in his community of being Mexican and perceived as gay.

Other participants described feeling silenced and invisible even in moments that should have been particularly triumphant and enjoyable. Fred described one particularly memorable event in his experience:

“And I got an award. And I just remember walking up to get it in the gym, with the entire school there, and I thought, ‘Oh god, oh god, oh god. Who’s going to scream what?’ It wasn’t because I was nervous to walk up there, it was just, I thought, somebody was going to scream something. So it was always something that was constantly in the back of my mind...” (Fred).

Even in a moment where he was receiving an important award, Fred was frightened by what might happen, even in a moment that should have been enjoyable. He received the award, but was not fully present because of his constant worry of not “passing”. For several participants, potential victimization cast a shadow on many important and altogether positive moments that would normally have been seen as triumphs or victories.

Even during everyday activities, many of these students felt threatened and fearful for their safety. Events such as spending time with friends, dating, classroom settings, and eating lunch in the lunchroom were anxiety provoking. Two of these students even removed themselves from the lunchroom and instead spent their lunchtime in the school band room in order to avoid potential victimization.

*Need for “Safe Places”*

“I really tried to cover my tracks a lot, and I, I didn’t really put myself out there in any way. I just tried to find circles where I didn’t have to be so clearly, like, you know, I wasn’t connected to like the really macho athletes” (Gerald).

Several of the participants discussed the longing to find a place that was “safe”.

These students either found a physical location that felt safe, such as the band room during lunch instead of the cafeteria, or a social group that made them feel safe. Gerald, in the passage above, describes hiding behind those who were more confident than him, and those who were not affiliated with those who perpetrated the victimization. The following passage is Louis’ account of how he felt after a particularly memorable instance of victimization:

“I was like, ‘That was a horrible situation, no one was there for me friends wise, or anything. I don’t want to put them in that situation. I don’t want to put myself mainly in that situation, so it’s better to just avoid it altogether” (Louis).

Louis did not describe finding a safe space, but alluded to his effort to seek one. The closest he came to safety was the strategy of avoidance.

*Found Sanctuary in Non-Conforming Peers*

Several participants found more accepting peers in cliques that were separate from the “jocks” or those who were “popular”:

“I was in marching band but I was also this punk, skater type person, that was my community. So, you were freer to kind of be different and not really fit in...”

(Gerald).

Groups such as marching band, theatre, punks, skaters, “outsiders”, music groups, and those who were “artsy” were more accepting of difference. But this acceptance only extended so far. Two different participants mentioned that they felt much safer in these groups of “liberal”, like-minded peers, but that they still never mentioned their sexuality. Still, these groups did extend a semblance of protection to each participant that prevented further victimization.

*Self-Minimization: “I got off really easy”*

“And you hear these stories of these people that were devastated in their high school years, and that carries on with them through their adult life. I don’t really feel connected in that way to those people, except for the teasing and the harassment that I experienced. I can relate to them on that level” (Mark).



Every participant in the study minimized the victimization that they experienced. When looking at the passage from Mark's interview, the reader can perceive Mark's way of adaptively downplaying the seriousness of his own experiences in contrast to those who were really "devastated" by their victimization. However, the question remains as to whether one form of victimization is any more "real" than another; it appears that the differences may lie only in degrees.

Another participant had the following to say:

"...so I didn't get picked on horribly, per se, whereas there was another guy who was my age, who was gay, and not that he wasn't liked or anything, but he had fag keyed into his locker and stuff like that, but I never had anything like that, I mean I, for the most part had a halfway decent high school experience" (Fred).

Fred, unlike Mark, had a concrete example of how the victimization could have been much worse. The other gay student his age symbolized what he did not want to happen to him, and the fear and apprehension he had about the entire high school atmosphere in general. Other participants described how the high school experience as a whole was not as damaging to their self-image as experiences with family. Minimizing traumatic experiences may be a way for each of these men to cope with the victimization that they experienced.

*Teachers minimized victimization*

Two of the participants described specific teachers that may have known that victimization was occurring, but did either nothing or had a minimal response to bullying:

“...most teachers say, ‘It’s kids being kids, it’s just part of growing up.’ They were picked on just as much...” (Louis).

Teachers recognized victimization only in a very general sense, and even then minimized what was happening because they themselves may have experienced victimization when they were adolescents as well, and thus normalized such experiences. Another participant wrote about his gay identity in a class assignment, but did not receive any support even with obvious signs. This may have been another example of minimization.

*Internalized Homophobia: “This is not how I should be”*

Three participants described harboring negative feelings towards themselves and a general lack of self-esteem, often as a direct result of being relentlessly victimized.

These participants also insulted others, sometimes calling them gay as well:

“To me, it [victimization] made me feel guilty. Because I hated that... once I figured out that I was definitely gay, I felt like, ‘This is not how I should be’” (Blake).

Blake’s experiences of internal victimization were especially salient. He describes in this passage having felt “guilty” for discovering his identity, especially in the face of

victimization. His high school surroundings were not especially supportive of gay students.

“But then, nobody came out. I think that the gaps were within ourselves, because we didn’t think we could come out, and I don’t think we could at that time without getting really abused” (Blake).

Even in this passage, Blake describes the supportive gaps as being “within ourselves”. He did not attribute the gaps in support to the lack of teacher and administrator attention to the issue, but to himself instead. Other participants described similar feelings, which may have been a direct result of the covert and overt messages that each gay student received about their sexual identity.

#### Perceptions and Recommendations for the High School Environment

When asked what could have been improved in the high school environment, as well as where the gaps in social support are, every participant gave several examples of what they would have liked to see, and what should be available to LGBTQ youth in high schools today.

##### *More safe space signage*

“...having things around that let youth know that it’s okay to be gay, it’s okay to be different, it’s okay to be anything. I would have liked to have seen there was somewhere or someone that was doing that” (Gerald).

Two men expressed interest in seeing more “safe space signage”, much like stickers that are seen in more supportive high school environments today. Rather than facing an atmosphere of denial and invisibility, safe space signage is seen as a concrete sign of support. And safe space signage signifies more than an acceptance of being gay. It signifies an acceptance of diversity and difference in general.

*Just talking about anything is helpful*

“So he helped me love myself as a person, not as, sexual orientation wise. I didn’t feel that that was necessary for us to have some dialogue back and forth about what I was going through” (Mark).

Three men pointed out that they did not expect or seek out support specifically related to their sexual orientation. Instead, having a supportive teacher that they could talk to about any issue was helpful in and of itself. Teachers who were “supportive” and “personable” were a source of support for these three, although sexual orientation was not even seen as an appropriate topic. Teachers that may have even had an inclination never provided overt support. Support was extended to these students, but only to a certain point. Still, these teachers did help these students to develop a sense of identity in general, just not in relation to sexual identity.

*Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)*

“We didn’t have a gay club in high school, cause heaven forbid you’re a target. Even in college, those gay clubs still got shit... It just made it easier to target, if you wanted to hate on somebody...” (Louis).

Every participant in the study expressed similar thoughts about GSAs. None of the men had a GSA in their high school environment, so each was asked if they would have attended if there had been a similar organization. None of the participants would have done so. Participants had the perception that they would have become a “target” if they attended such an organization, and weighed the downsides to attending as much heavier than the upsides. Four of the participants said that they would attend if the meeting space and time were confidential, but one participant had a different view of GSAs from the others:

“...I was just like, oh god. Why do I need to be in a sexuality club? It didn’t make sense to me. Along with that whole being a gay man or a man who’s gay, and I’ve never defined myself by my sexuality. And I think that, doing stuff like that, is a reason people get ridiculed. It’s kind of like putting a target on your back” (Fred).

Fred thought that joining a club which focused on sexuality would not be a positive experience for him. His separation between core identity and sexual identity seems to be a primary reason he does not view GSAs positively. He sees the organization not as a

source of support, but as a chance to be ridiculed. He also fears backlash, much like the others.

### *Role models*

Several participants mentioned a lack of role models in both the high school environment and in society at large:

“It’s so hard because I think there’s so many images of queerness in the media, in the world, but they’re not accurate representations, they’re the same sort of stereotypes. They’re a little broader, but you know, there’s this sort of package idea of what a man is, what a woman is, what a gay man is, what a lesbian is...”

(Gerald).

Gerald thinks the media has made major strides when it comes to representing “queerness”, but he still views the representation that exists as a “package” of “stereotypes”. Still, each participant viewed the high school experience as being generally more positive because of the presence of role models both on a macro scale and a micro scale. Fred also described a particular gay role model in his life:

“One of the first people I met in high school that helped me come out, helped me find a gay person, I asked him one night... about anal sex, how afraid I was, didn’t seem like a fun idea to me. And I said, ‘Does that make me any less of a gay man because I don’t want to do it?’ And he said, ‘Absolutely not.’ And that

was one of my worries... one more thing that makes me feel isolated or not part of the group” (Fred).

This particular gay man helped Fred to realize that he was not alone, and that his personal preferences sexually did not mean that he was “any less of a gay man”. Fred describes a dual isolation, feeling set apart from both the heterosexist society at large, and the general gay culture. It seems that having a gay role model in his life helped him to realize that he did not have to isolate or not be a “part of the group”.

*Acceptance happens in a diverse environment*

“I think that there were, I think that there are more open people. Racially, sexually, in an environment that’s not so homogenous” (Mark).

Three participants expressed an interest in fostering a more diverse high school environment, which they believed may lead to a more inclusive environment as well. Mark specifically described how diverse he wished his high school environment had been, as well as what may need to happen to foster a more open environment, including diversity training and school assemblies. Mark also described “a system teaching a group of children that you don’t fit in”, and how he wished the school as a whole could be more “eclectic” like his group of friends.

Gerald, on the other hand, saw his urban environment as being much more conducive to discovering his identity than his school environment:

“Well, I think part of it is any big city is going to have more resources, more options. You can be a queer kid and walk around the city and see other people like you, and you don’t even have to be out...” (Gerald).

His description of the high school environment was very stifling and was very homogenous, but his description of the urban environment as a whole was much more inclusive and diverse. Just being able to “see other people like you” was an enormous benefit while he was developing.

*“...they exist, and they are known to exist.”*

“Some schools don’t have GSAs but... everyone knows someone who is queer, and they may fight every day, they may get harassed, but they exist, and they are known to exist” (Gerald).

Several different participants described their perception of the high school environment today, and the progress that they believe has been achieved in schools in general. Gerald describes that queer youth are now “known to exist”, even if they may still be “harassed”. He gave the most negative account of the progress that has been made, but still does see progress, however incremental.

Other participants were much more optimistic:



“Well, it’s cool now. Um, I mean it’s not uber-cool, but it’s stylish to be seen as bisexual. I think they have it easier because it’s more mainstreamed than it ever has been. You see it all around. Kids just assume that it’s an ok thing...” (Fred).

Fred sees identifying as bisexual as “stylish” and “ok”. He perceives that the high school environment is much more tolerant and even inclusive, and that LGBTQ identity has become more of a non-issue. When describing these perceptions, participants cite personal anecdotes and media stories that they have seen and heard. Gay students are “stood up for by other friends and even faculty” (Blake). The participants’ perceptions of what the high school experience of LGBTQ youth must be like is far more positive than what the research literature is actually reporting.

#### *Self-Acceptance through coming-out*

“He was an organist in a church somewhere or something, really nice guy, and he was 30 or 35, and he had not come out to his parents yet. And I remember thinking, ‘I have? And a thirty something year old hasn’t?’ And that’s what started me on a road that I was proud that I had done it. At the time I didn’t think it was such a good thing, but with time I realized that I had done myself a favor, a big big favor” (Fred).

Fred was the only participant in the study that came out to everyone in his surroundings at an early age (16 years old). He describes the “pride” that he felt for

accepting his sexual identity, even in the face of the victimization that he experienced.

Other participants, however, only came out to a select few peers, but received generally positive reactions. Mark described the self-acceptance that he experienced even though he did not reveal his sexual identity in high school:

“I didn’t have any gender identity issues past puberty really. It just kind of, I was like, ‘Well, this is what I like. It’s not an issue of maybe I can change it.’ Or anything like that. So I just kind of accepted it for what it was” (Mark).

Even though he was not out in the high school environment, he still achieved a personal understanding of his sexual identity, and thus making him a “stronger person”. Many of the gay students also expressed a personal strength that they tapped into to survive the victimization, and to even learn from it. Fred described his sexual identity as not being a “form of contention”, and separated his core personal identity from his sexual identity. These men were able to survive the victimization that they experienced, and even grew from these stressors. These gay men saw coming-out to select, trusted friends and teachers/administrators as a positive influence on their sexual and personal identity.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This discussion focuses on how the remembered experiences of high school victimization of gay men one to two decades out from high school compare to the literature on LGBTQ youth today. The following topic areas are compared and contrasted between this group of participants and today's youth: the presence of risk factors, sexual identity formation, cohort effect, social support and psychosocial distress, youth victimization, and protective factors. The discussion centers on which areas of LGBTQ youth inclusion and acceptance in the school environment have improved and which remain problems.

The findings of this particular study indicate that each participant had particularly vivid memories of their high school experience, and that each participant experienced victimization. Participants vividly remember analyzing every move they made and every expression they used to discern whether they were being perceived as “masculine” or “feminine” by others. It appears that ways in which non-traditional gender expression is perceived contributed to school victimization. Collectively, these men reported being teased, threatened, alienated, ignored, and feeling completely being left out of the high school experience. This sense of not belonging created social isolation. Perpetrators were usually from privileged groups, such as those comprising the peers who were labeled

“popular”, “athletic”, “jocks”, or “masculine”. Other males were most commonly the perpetrators.

These men also found hope and strength within what often felt like an overtly hostile environment. Despite constant messages to the contrary, many of the participants were able to develop their own sense of identity, even if it was non-conformist in nature. While feeling “different”, “alienated”, and commonly viewed as the “other” created a negative social experience for these men in their youth, it appears that these negative events and challenges were offset by their own resilience, and further strengthened their resolve. Claiming a gay identity, especially in the ensuing years after high school, is part of the LGBTQ adolescent struggle, but each participant ultimately overcame the victimization they experienced, and even thrived. This is a testament to the strength and fortitude that each young man had throughout their development.

The overarching question that underlies the intentions of the study is whether the gay adolescent experience that these men had similar or different to the experiences of adolescents today? There seem to be many similarities and some differences. And while the experiences of these five men barely scratch the surface of gay adolescent experiences during this time period, we can still learn from each intimate experience and use them to compare and contrast.

#### *Presence of Risk Factors*

Kulkin, Chauvin, & Percle (2000); Meyer (2003); Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, and Smith (2001); Bontempo and D'Agelli (2002); and Ryan (2003) discuss several risk factors that gay adolescents experience in high school today. These risk factors included isolation from family and peers, anxiety and low self-esteem, internalized homophobia, religious conflict, higher levels of substance abuse, suicidal ideation and attempts, and risky sexual behavior. These factors are attributed to being of LGBTQ status in the high school and home environments, and the discrimination that these youths experience from peers and teachers/administrators.

The adolescent experiences that are detailed in this study fall directly in line with the findings in both of these studies. All five participants reported constant victimization that had many pervasive effects, most notably low self-esteem and internalized homophobia. Each participant discussed at times feeling hopeless, depressed, and several participants mentioned suicidal ideation. None of the participants in the sample mentioned substance abuse, and only alluded to risky sexual behavior. Still, it seems that the men in this study experienced similar risk factors and faced similar problems.

### *Sexual Identity Formation*

Participants also recounted experiences about sexual identity formation. According to Ryan (2003) and Anhalt and Morris (1998), sexual identity is shaped by attitudes, values, beliefs about sexuality, stereotypes about gender and sex roles, religious

values, the degree of acculturation into society, and the importance of family and ethnicity in one's life. According to Ryan (2003), 1 in 3 LGBTQ adolescents report being harassed at school, and have heard homophobic remarks from peers, had their property damaged at school, were threatened with a weapon at school, and had skipped school because they felt unsafe. This stress is correlated with heightened levels of isolation from family and peers, anxiety/low self-esteem, internalized homophobia, religious conflict, higher levels of substance abuse, suicidal ideation/attempts, and risky sexual behavior. Anhalt and Morris (1998) performed a review of current LGBTQ literature, and reported higher incidences of suicidal attempts, high levels of verbal victimization, and less frequent physical victimization during vital periods of adolescent sexual identity formation. All adolescents take cues from others in their peer group regarding sexual identity formation, and those without a peer group or those who are alienated may not receive these cues. It is evident from the literature that gay identity formation continues to be a challenge for the adolescents of today despite the advances made in gay activism. Heterosexist privilege and homophobic messages still have a powerful social influence.

#### *Gender Expression and Perceptions of Others*

Participants described in detail how their gay sexual identity formation emerged and evolved. Most participants did not have one significant peer group that they turned to for cues, and instead heard through hearsay and observed through others' actions what

being “masculine” or “feminine” meant. These men also experienced victimization based on how others perceived their gender expression, and thus received many negative messages about who they were and what their sexual identity and gender expression meant. Many participants recalled trying to “pass” as “masculine”, and thus dichotomized gender expression as firmly “masculine” or “feminine”. Being “feminine” and “gay” were bound together in one package, while being “masculine” and “straight” were the other option. Participants also experienced internalized victimization and low self-esteem. This is similar to how sexual identity and gender expression are seen by today’s adolescents. LGBTQ adolescents continue to struggle with defining their sexual identity and gender expression because of varying and confusing messages from the media, from family, and from peers. The experiences and the problems that emerged because of persistent victimization are remarkably similar to LGBTQ adolescent experience today. Therefore, the experiences of these five adolescents 10-15 years ago is similar to the literature on this subject today.

### *Cohort Effect*

Gambrill (2006) discusses the “cohort effect”, or the effect that events on a macro and micro scale have on a particular cohort or generation of people, or in this case specifically adolescents. Today’s adolescents are living in an age of instant gratification, interdependence, technological advancement, and have experienced significant world

events such as 9/11 and several school shootings. Additionally, today's adolescents have several role models in the media who identify as LGBTQ, and these figures have a profound effect on today's adolescents. Today, differently from one or two decades ago, most people in society either know someone who identifies as part of this population, or can at least see a representation of it on television. Thus, while LGBTQ adolescents may still be victimized, they are at least known to exist. Hansen (2007) and King (2008) discuss protective factors in the high school environment and targeted interventions toward LGBTQ youth that exist today, and these reflect a greater openness to targeted interventions in schools today. King (2008) explored in a qualitative study the perceived role of counselor support from the LGBT adolescent perspective. Students perceived administrators/counselors as having a lack of knowledge about the LGBQ population, and cited this as a barrier to support. Restraining forces in the school environment included homophobic comments, association of counselor with other silent school administrators, a lack of LGBQ subjects in curriculum, and a fear that the counselor would break confidentiality. Supporting forces included inclusion in the school environment, inclusion in curriculum, a non-judgmental attitude, and an emphasis on confidentiality and LGBQ posters/stickers. Hansen (2007) conducted a literature review of current interventions for LGBT youth focused at three levels of analysis; Level I (Theoretical Basis), Level II (Empirical Research), and Level III (Program Evaluation).



Several themes emerged from the review. Firstly, suicidal attempts and ideation are easier to report for the LGBT community than actual suicides because of the societal stigma associated with both LGBT status and suicide. LGBT teenage suicide rates may be up to three times higher than heterosexual suicide rates. Intervention strategies included many of those mentioned by King, including forming GSA's and providing a more inclusive curriculum. In particular, GSAs have been correlated in the literature with improved relationships with peers and adults.

These gay men, on the other hand, reported a gaping lack of visibility within the high school environment, and within society in general. They described being "invisible", "unseen", or they just didn't know others who identified as part of the gay community. The only events on a macro scale were centered on HIV/AIDS activism, and this just included affluent white gay men. Participants also reflected upon the changing societal atmosphere today, and the improving landscape for today's gay adolescents in high school. Participants cited several reasons for their feelings of isolation, such as the time period (late 80's/early 90's), the lack of gay role models on a micro and macro scale, and a general lack of discussion about LGBTQ issues in the curriculum. Thus, while there is still much ground to cover, 10-15 years ago these men, who were then adolescents, experienced a greater level of isolation and alienation than what is reflected in the

literature today. Supportive forces exist for many LGBTQ adolescents today, but simply did not exist for these participants 10-15 years ago.

### *Social Support and Psychosocial Distress*

Several articles or studies in the literature describe the mitigating effect that social support has on psychosocial distress in the high school atmosphere (Williams, Connolly, Pepler & Craig, 2004; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett & Koenig, 2008; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Munoz-Plaza, Quinn and Rounds 2002). Williams, Connolly, Pepler and Craig (2004) hypothesized that LGB adolescents would have higher rates of victimization in the high school setting, and that there would be a link between high rates of victimization and psychosocial difficulties, with a mediating effect of less social support than heterosexual adolescents. The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was administered, as well as measures of victimization (bullying, sexual harassment, and physical abuse by peers) using Likert-type scales in a questionnaire. LGBQ individuals reported greater rates of psychosocial distress and victimization than their heterosexual peers, and in a multivariate analysis they found that strong social support negates the effects of depression. Espelage, Aragon, Birkett and Koenig (2008) hypothesized that sexual minority youth were more likely to report high levels of depression/substance abuse. 13, 291 youth from 18 different high schools in a Midwestern county were given the Dane County Youth Survey, which included questions

about LGBQ status. The results indicated that sexually questioning youth experienced more victimization than their LGB peers, and that alcohol/marijuana use and suicidal/depressed feelings were greater in LGB students than heterosexual students. A mediating factor in this study was parental support. If parental support was high, then the experiences of LGBQ youth did not differ substantially from comparable heterosexual youth. Murdock and Bolch (2005) conducted a study with 101 participants, recruited through convenience sampling from local LGBT community centers, and through snowball sampling, to explore the relationship between school victimization and psychosocial outcomes. Variables were measured on a likert scale to interpret the varying degrees of each variable in the student's life, and the student's GPA was taken into account to measure school achievement. Higher levels of school exclusion were correlated with lower teacher support and decreased feelings of belonging. Additionally, LGB status accounted for about 10% of the variation in GPA. In this study, parental support did not alleviate the stress that resulted from the school environment, stressing even more the importance of intervention in schools. Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) hypothesized that a specific group for LGB adolescents, such as a GSA (gay-straight alliance) would be correlated with lower victimization in schools, and thus lower frequencies of risk factors. Also, school administrator support should be correlated with similar outcomes. Findings indicated that the larger the school size and

more homogeneous the population, the more likely LGBTQ students would feel unsafe. Programs associated with lower rates of victimization/suicidality included peer-support programs, nonacademic counseling, specific school anti-bullying policies, a student judiciary, staff training on sexual harassment, and peer-tutoring systems. Munoz-Plaza, Quinn and Rounds (2002) explored the types of social support (emotional, appraisal, instrumental and informational) available to young adults in high school. The study also examined the connection between social support and sexual identity development. The authors conducted face-to-face interviews with 12 male and female participants, 18-21 years old, who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Participants found non-family members, which included peers and non-family adults, to be more supportive than family members. Participants perceived heterosexual and LGBTQ-identified friends and non-family adults as providing emotional and instrumental support. However, participants perceived limitations to the emotional support they received from heterosexual peers to whom they disclosed their orientation. In addition to providing emotional support, peers and adults who also identified as LGBTQ provided valuable informational and appraisal, support. Most participants did not disclose to their parents during high school and perceived their parents and family members as offering limited emotional, appraisal and informational support. Sexual identity formation was also discussed, including aspects of denial and acceptance. The need for multiple resources

emerged as a major theme, and participants described their longing for greater social support in their high school environment.

Adolescents in the study described their experiences with social support as strong on some levels with peers, and fairly non-existent with school teachers and administrators. Each adolescent described being accepted by a group of non-conforming peers, but were not accepted by “popular” or “masculine” individuals. Still, they did find acceptance with a certain group of peers, even if these peers did not know about their gay identity. On the other hand, school teachers and administrators did not provide support for these adolescents. There were a few select teachers, many times perceived as gay or lesbian themselves, who did reach out to help these adolescents. Unfortunately, these adolescents could not accept the support for fear of being labeled as gay. They also did not want targeted interventions toward LGBTQ youth for fear of being labeled. So a significant difference between adolescents then and today is that today’s gay adolescents are able to at least receive social support from teachers based on their gay identity, even if the school environment is still somewhat hostile and heterosexist. And while there were no targeted interventions toward LGBTQ youth in the past, several exist today, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA’s) and safe space signage (stickers or signs indicating safe spaces to discuss LGBTQ issues). LGBTQ adolescents today experience a greater level of inclusion, but when they do not, they still experience similar repercussions.

### *Youth Victimization Today*

According to the GLSEN School Climate Survey (2007), LGBTQ youth still experience a significant amount of victimization based on their sexual and gender identity. These adolescents still hear homophobic remarks from teachers and peers, are physically harassed, do not reveal problems to school staff, feel unsafe in the high school environment, and experienced heightened levels of suicidal ideation and attempts, absenteeism, and psychosocial distress when compared to their heterosexual peers. LGBTQ adolescents still feel excluded and alienated in their high school environment, but are at least recognized as a population by some school teachers and administrators.

Thus, the perception by participants in this study that the high school environment is more tolerant and inclusive today is only true to a point. Youth today still experience victimization based on their gay identity, and are still affected in much the same way as the participants were in the past. Participants reported feeling unsafe, “alienated”, “outcast”, and suffered from verbal victimization and rare instances of physical victimization. Gay adolescents today still have many of the same experiences, and while the five experiences detailed in this study are not generalizable to the entire population, they still show that experiences 10-15 years ago and today still have many similarities. Additionally, the lackluster response during the recruitment phase of the study may have been because of this general complacency with the state of LGBTQ adolescents today,

and the perception that most major issues have been resolved in the high school atmosphere.

### *Protective Factors*

King (2008) and Hansen (2007) discuss what gay and lesbian adolescents see as protective factors in today's high school environment. Inclusion in the school environment, inclusion in curriculum, a non-judgmental attitude, and an emphasis on confidentiality and LGBTQ posters/stickers were protective, as were school teachers and administrators who did not perpetuate the silence that has long been associated with LGBTQ adolescents in the high school environment. King and Hansen do not specifically talk about the idea of "privileged groups", while the participants in this study described this high school hierarchy in detail.

Protective factors cited by participants were very different from those cited by adolescents today. Protective factors included being in a privileged group, such as those who were "popular" or excessively "masculine", having non-conforming peers, associating with those that had strong and solid ideas of their identity, having safe spaces to go to, and having teachers and administrators who were supportive in a general sense. Any intervention targeted specifically toward LGBTQ youth in the high school environment was seen as inappropriate and dangerous. Specifically, each participant was asked if they would have attended a GSA if one had been available. Every participant

stated that they would not attend, oftentimes even if the GSA met in a confidential space. This may be attributed to the ramifications of being “found out” compared to today, and the real lack of awareness on the part of administrators of LGBTQ youth. Thus, youth today want to see a more inclusive high school atmosphere and see the possibilities, while the participants in this study could not even conceive of a supportive atmosphere because of the time period.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1: Implications for Social Work Practice

While these experiences are not indicative of every adolescent experience in this age group cohort, the experiences of these five men compared to the literature on LGBTQ youth today shows a general lack of change on a micro and macro level. Social work practitioners can learn a great amount from such intimate experiences. LGBTQ youth continue to face victimization in the high school environment, and while on a macro scale there is greater inclusiveness because of LGBTQ role models and a greater general societal tolerance of alternative lifestyles, there is still much ground to cover. The experiences of these five men, in many instances, could be the experiences of adolescents today as well. There is still a lack of targeted interventions for LGBTQ youth, such as GSAs, safe space signage, or teachers and administrators who are trained to deal with issues that are particularly relevant to this population. Given the period of time since these participants were in high school (10-15 years ago), one might expect there to be a much more inclusive environment in high schools around the nation. Unfortunately, this has not occurred, and is indicative of the homophobia and heterosexism that still exists in the nation's social institutions.

Social workers in the high school environment can have a profound impact upon these adolescents. By creating targeted interventions while not singling out youth based

on their sexual and gender identity, the high school environment can become much more inclusive. Also, mandatory training about LGBTQ adolescent needs for teachers and administrators, facilitated by a social worker, would be particularly helpful. By learning from the past experiences of these gay men and other LGBTQ adolescents in the past, those who work in high schools can avoid a repetition of past injustice. Additionally, advocating for a more inclusive high school curriculum can help these adolescents to not feel completely invisible.

Social Work Education has a responsibility to create a curriculum that is inclusive and sensitive to the needs of the LGBTQ adolescent population. Issues of suicidal ideation/attempts, depression, anxiety, verbal and physical victimization, potential sources of social support in the high school and home atmospheres, and targeted interventions for LGBTQ youth should be discussed and incorporated into social work practice curriculum. Additionally, social work students should be prepared to practice the professional Code of Ethics that place emphasis on self-determination of their clients, the inherent dignity and worth of all people, social justice, and cultural competence. Social Work Education and social work practitioners have a responsibility to lead in these areas. Respecting LGBTQ adolescents and the decisions that they make about their biopsychosocial health is also imperative. By educating themselves and others about the LGBTQ adolescent experience, social workers can do a world of good and foster a more

inclusive and diverse high school environment, and help improve the psychosocial health of these adolescents.

## 6.2: Limitations of Study

The study was subject to the bias inherent in convenience sampling and qualitative interviewing (Padgett, 1998). The semi-structured interview guide minimized interviewer bias because it provided a structure and a similar environment for each separate interview. While the qualitative methods of the study do not lend themselves to generalizability, this is not looked upon as a limitation in qualitative inquiry, but rather it is not an expectation of the research aims or process. Those aspects of the study that may be considered methodological limitations include: 1) the retrospective nature of the study, relying on recall of the participants about their high school experiences; 2) the small sample size included in the study; 3) the sample did not constitute diversity across the ethnic/racial spectrum; there were five men who were White and one participant who was Latino. Other cohorts of gay men may have reported different experiences.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Semi-Structured Guide Questions**

- 1) Can you tell me about a particularly memorable time in high school when you experienced victimization based on being perceived as gay?
- 2) What kinds of victimization did you experience? Who perpetrated the victimization?
- 3) How did teachers and administrators respond to this victimization?
- 4) How do you think victimization may have affected your daily life as a gay student?
- 5) How do you think victimization affected your self-esteem and how you thought about yourself?
- 6) Do you recall any particular situations in which the school administration gave you support? In retrospect, do you remember these actions?
- 7) Were there people you felt you could trust in high school? What situations prompted you to seek the support of this person/people? Did seeking their support help alleviate the stress of victimization? How so?
- 8) Were there ever times in high school when you received unsolicited support from others regarding your gay identity?
- 9) Where do you feel the gaps were in your social support system?

## **Appendix B**

### **Demographic Questionnaire**

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Current Gender Identity: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Sexual Orientation \_\_\_\_\_
4. Ethnicity/Race \_\_\_\_\_
5. Highest Level of Education \_\_\_\_\_
6. Occupation \_\_\_\_\_